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# For Asian-American Couples, a Tie That Binds

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

WHEN she was a philosophy student at Harvard College eight years ago, Liane Young never thought twice about all the interracial couples who flitted across campus, arm and arm, hand in hand. Most of her Asian friends had white boyfriends or girlfriends. In her social circles, it was simply the way of the world.

But today, the majority of Ms. Young's Asian-American friends on Facebook have Asian-American husbands or wives. And Ms. Young, a Boston-born granddaughter of Chinese immigrants, is married to a Harvard medical student who loves skiing and the Pittsburgh Steelers and just happens to have been born in Fujian Province in China.

Ms. Young said she hadn't been searching for a boyfriend with an Asian background. They met by chance at a nightclub in Boston, and she is delighted by how completely right it feels. They have taken lessons together in Cantonese (which she speaks) and Mandarin (which he speaks), and they hope to pass along those languages when they have children someday.

"We want Chinese culture to be a part of our lives and our kids' lives," said Ms. Young, 29, an assistant professor of psychology at Boston College who married Xin Gao, 27, last year. "It's another part of our marriage that we're excited to tackle together."

Interracial marriage rates are at an all-time high in the United States, with the percentage of couples exchanging vows across the color line more than doubling over the last 30 years. But Asian-Americans are bucking that trend, increasingly choosing their soul mates from among their own expanding community.

From 2008 to 2010, the percentage of Asian-American newlyweds who were born in the United States and who married someone of a different race dipped by nearly 10 percent, according to a recent analysis of census data conducted by the Pew Research Center. Meanwhile, Asians are increasingly marrying other Asians, a separate study shows, with matches between the American-born and foreign-born jumping to 21 percent in 2008, up from 7 percent in 1980.

Asian-Americans still have one of the highest interracial marriage rates in the country, with 28 percent of newlyweds choosing a non-Asian spouse in 2010, according to census data. But a surge in immigration from Asia over the last three decades has greatly increased the number of eligible bachelors and bachelorettes, giving young people many more options among Asian-

Americans. It has also inspired a resurgence of interest in language and ancestral traditions among some newlyweds.

In 2010, 10.2 million Asian immigrants were living in the United States, up from 2.2 million in 1980. Today, foreign-born Asians account for about 60 percent of the Asian-American population here, census data shows.

“Immigration creates a ready pool of marriage partners,” said Daniel T. Lichter, a demographer at Cornell University who, along with Zhenchao Qian of Ohio State University, conducted the study on marriages between American-born and foreign-born Asians. “They bring their language, their culture and reinforce that culture here in the United States for the second and third generations.”

Before she met Mr. Gao, Ms. Young had dated only white men, with the exception of a biracial boyfriend in college. She said she probably wouldn’t be planning to teach her children Cantonese and Mandarin if her husband had not been fluent in Mandarin. “It would be really hard,” said Ms. Young, who is most comfortable speaking in English.

Ed Lin, 36, a marketing director in Los Angeles who was married in October, said that his wife, Lily Lin, had given him a deeper understanding of many Chinese traditions. Mrs. Lin, 32, who was born in Taiwan and grew up in New Orleans, has taught him the terms in Mandarin for his maternal and paternal grandparents, familiarized him with the red egg celebrations for newborns and elaborated on other cultural customs, like the proper way to exchange red envelopes on Chinese New Year.

“She brings to the table a lot of small nuances that are embedded culturally,” Mr. Lin said of his wife, who has also encouraged him to serve tea to his elders and refer to older people as aunty and uncle.

Of course, race is only one of many factors that can come to bear in the complicated calculus of romance. And marriage trends vary among Asians of different nationalities, according to C. N. Le, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Dr. Le found that in 2010 Japanese-American men and women had the highest rates of intermarriage to whites while Vietnamese-American men and Indian women had the lowest rates.

The term Asian, as defined by the Census Bureau, encompasses a broad group of people who trace their origins to the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent, including countries like Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands and Vietnam. (The Pew Research Center also included Pacific Islanders in its study.)

Wendy Wang, the author of the Pew report, said that demographers have yet to conduct detailed surveys or interviews of newlyweds to help explain the recent dip in interracial marriages among native-born Asians. (Statistics show that the rate of interracial marriage among Asians has been

declining since 1980.) But in interviews, several couples said that sharing their lives with someone who had a similar background played a significant role in their decision to marry.

It is a feeling that has come as something of a surprise to some young Asian-American women who had grown so comfortable with interracial dating that they began to assume that they would end up with white husbands. (Intermarriage rates are significantly higher among Asian women than among men. About 36 percent of Asian-American women married someone of another race in 2010, compared with about 17 percent of Asian-American men.)

Chau Le, 33, a Vietnamese-American lawyer who lives in Boston, said that by the time she received her master's degree at Oxford University in 2004, her parents had given up hope that she would marry a Vietnamese man. It wasn't that she was turning down Asian-American suitors; those dates simply never led to anything more serious.

Ms. Le said she was a bit wary of Asian-American men who wanted their wives to handle all the cooking, child rearing and household chores. "At some point in time, I guess I thought it was unlikely," she said. "My dating statistics didn't look like I would end up marrying an Asian guy."

But somewhere along the way, Ms. Le began thinking that she needed to meet someone slightly more attuned to her cultural sensibilities. That moment might have occurred on the weekend she brought a white boyfriend home to meet her parents.

Ms. Le is a gregarious, ambitious corporate lawyer, but in her parents' home, she said, "There's a switch that you flip." In their presence, she is demure. She looks down when she speaks, to demonstrate her respect for her mother and father. She pours their tea, slices their fruit and serves their meals, handing them dishes with both hands. Her white boyfriend, she said, was "weirded out" by it all.

"I didn't like that he thought that was weird," she said. "That's my role in the family. As I grew older, I realized a white guy was much less likely to understand that."

In fall 2010, she became engaged to Neil Vaishnav, an Indian-American lawyer who was born in the United States to immigrant parents, just as she was. They agreed that husbands and wives should be equal partners in the home, and they share a sense of humor that veers toward wackiness. (He encourages her out-of-tune singing and high kicks in karaoke bars.) But they also revere their family traditions of cherishing their elders.

Mr. Vaishnav, 30, knew instinctively that he should not kiss her in front of her parents or address them by their first names. "He has the same amount of respect and deference towards my family that I do," said Ms. Le, who is planning a September wedding that is to combine Indian and Vietnamese traditions. "I didn't have to say, 'Oh, this is how I am in my family.' "

Ann Liu, 33, a Taiwanese-American human resources coordinator in San Francisco, had a similar experience. She never imagined that an Asian-American husband was in the cards. Because she had never dated an Asian man before, her friends tried to discourage Stephen

Arboleda, a Filipino-American engineer, when he asked whether she was single. “She only dates white guys,” they warned.

But Mr. Arboleda, 33, was undeterred. “I’m going to change that,” he told them.

By then, Ms. Liu was ready for a change. She said she had grown increasingly uncomfortable with dating white men who dated only Asian-American women. “It’s like they have an Asian fetish,” she said. “I felt like I was more like this ‘concept.’ They couldn’t really understand me as a person completely.”

Mr. Arboleda was different. He has a sprawling extended family — and calls his older relatives aunt and uncle — just as she does. And he didn’t blink when she mentioned that she thought that her parents might live with her someday, a tradition among some Asian-American families.

At their October wedding in San Francisco, Ms. Liu changed from a sleek, sleeveless white wedding gown into the red, silk Chinese dress called the qipao. Several of Mr. Arboleda’s older relatives wore the white, Filipino dress shirts known as the barong.

“There was this bond that I had never experienced before in my dating world,” she said. “It instantly worked. And that’s part of the reason I married him.”